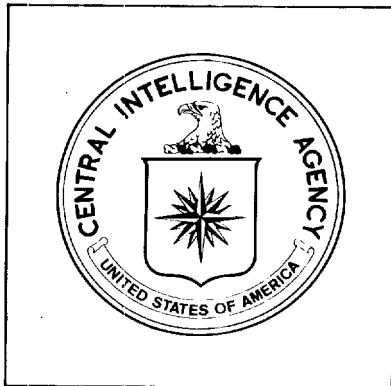


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STAFF NOTES:

Developments in Indochina

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA



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CAMBODIA

Shelling, Confusion Imperiled Voyage
of Cambodian Supply Convoy

[REDACTED]

A small ammunition convoy arrived in Phnom Penh on January 23 after a hazardous 60-mile voyage upriver from South Vietnam.

[REDACTED]

reports that show graphically the situation along the Mekong and the problems faced in keeping this vital supply line open.

Mekong River resupply convoy TP-11 consisted of two barges loaded with 1,900 tons of ammunition sandwiched between heavy armored shield barges, three of the most powerful tugs available, and 25 Cambodian navy escort vessels. The convoy crossed the border from South Vietnam late on January 21 amid considerable confusion. It was originally scheduled to include eight other vessels, which were kept back.

The Cambodian navy and air force commanders wanted at the last minute to delay even the smaller convoy to allow government troops more time to secure a point ten miles above the border where the river narrows, but they were overruled. Civilian crews aboard the tugs, unnerved by the repeated delays in sailing and by scare stories about Khmer Communist strength along the river, also were reluctant to start. The absence of Cambodian river pilots, who normally sail with each convoy, may have increased the trepidation.

The First Leg

Once under way, the convoy headed upstream at the agonizingly slow speed of under three knots

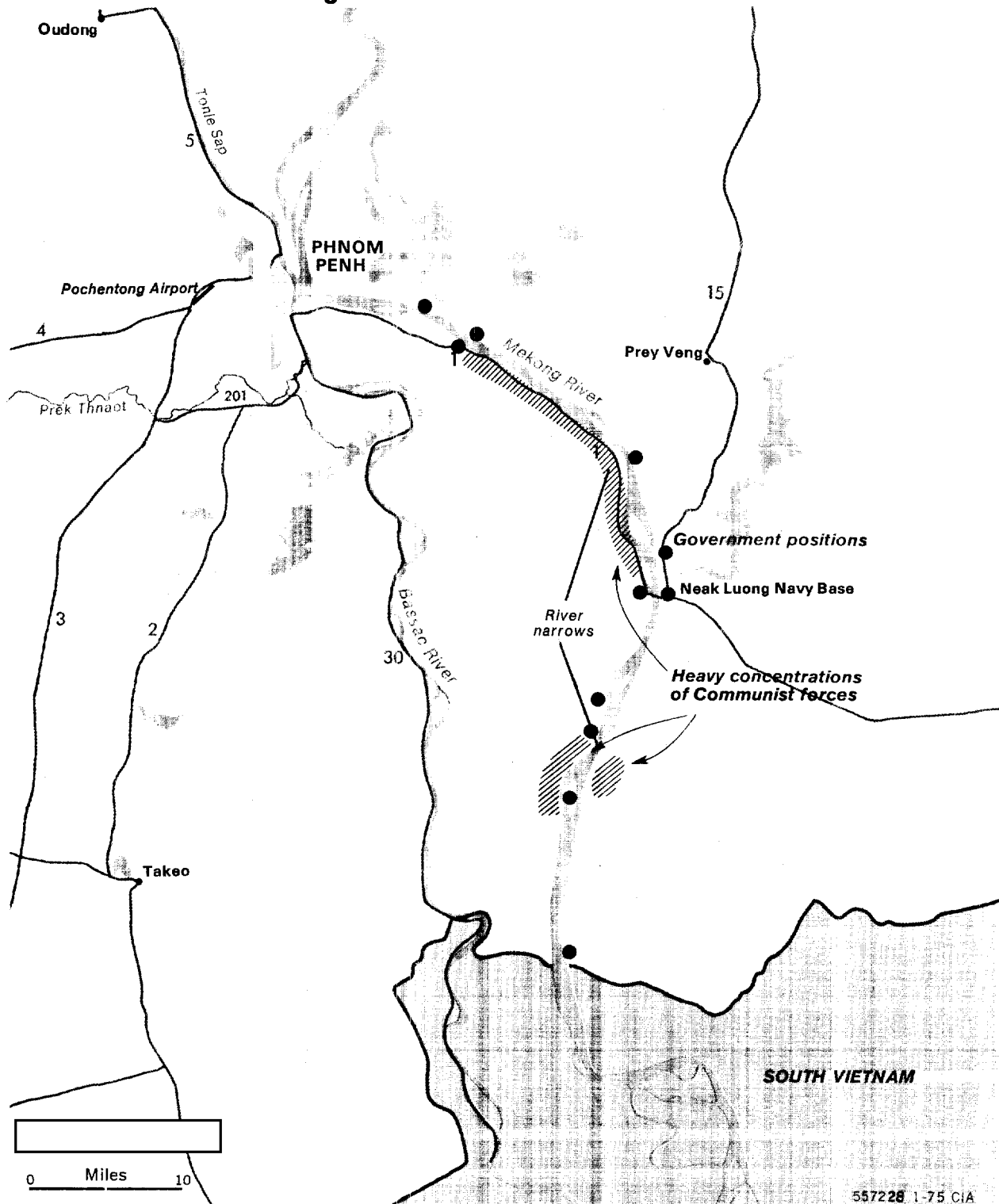
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Cambodia: Lower Mekong



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under an air umbrella of never fewer than three Cambodian air force gunships and two T-28 fighter-bombers. Despite the air cover and continuous suppressive fire from the naval escort vessels, the convoy began taking Communist shore fire soon after it passed a recently abandoned Cambodian artillery base a few miles north of the border. For the remainder of the voyage, the convoy took almost continuous fire from machine guns, rockets, recoilless rifles, and mortars set up in bunkers along the riverbanks.

Early on the morning of January 22, one tug ran aground several miles south of the first narrows. It freed itself, but the convoy was soon stopped dead when a second tug developed engine problems. Several of the shield barges then broke loose, requiring a juggling of barges and tugs to afford maximum protection. Action by the navy escort and a lull in shore fire prevented disaster.

The convoy successfully ran the first narrows later in the morning. Several days earlier, government troops had landed on an island in the narrows and partially destroyed a barricade placed across the river by the Communists.

Just north of the narrows, heavy enemy fire from shore knocked out a tug's engine. The navy and air force again reacted well, and the crippled tug was taken in tow. Sometime in the morning of January 22 the owner of one tug, who was in Saigon but was in radio contact with his vessel, threatened to order his captain to turn around. The navy convoy commander interceded, however, and by late that day the convoy had reached Neak Luong, about halfway to Phnom Penh.

Drama in the Home Stretch

The layover at Neak Luong was longer than expected because of problems with the civilian tug crews. When the crew of one tug refused to go on

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without a promise of higher wages, navy personnel took over and lifted anchor. The convoy commander noted, however, that a second tug was not following. It was tied up at Neak Luong, with its captain locked in his cabin. Navy crewmen then manned this tug as well, and it rejoined the convoy, with the captain apparently still demanding more money. Meanwhile, in Phnom Penh, government officials had to pay a \$100 bonus to crewmen before another tug could steam about 15 miles downriver from the capital to meet and assist the convoy.

The convoy encountered more heavy shelling at the narrows north of Neak Luong and at several other points, but the last vessel entered Phnom Penh harbor mid-morning Thursday. Communist gunners fired their last shots just as the convoy entered the harbor. The convoy commander was wounded during the last leg of the journey, and one ammunition barge arrived in the capital listing badly from a shell hole.

Lessons Learned

US officials in Phnom Penh urged Cambodian military leaders to take steps to ensure safer voyages by future convoys. Among their recommendations were:

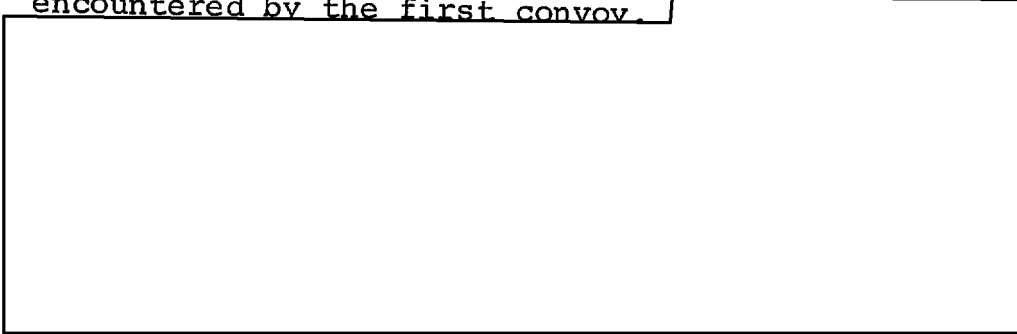
- Firm departure times from South Vietnam to prevent fatigue and nervousness among civilian crews.
- Meetings between ship captains and navy and air force personnel before sailing, so as to coordinate convoy procedures.
- Closer liaison with ship owners.
- More spare tugs and shield barges.

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A second resupply convoy arrived in Phnom Penh on January 27. It took heavy shelling en route, but implementation of many of the recommended measures prevented some of the difficulties encountered by the first convoy.



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SOUTH VIETNAM

Saigon Opposition Resurfaces



South Vietnam's principal opposition groups--the Catholic People's Anti-Corruption Movement and the Buddhist National Reconciliation Force--are taking some new steps to revive their public campaign against President Thieu. The two groups, along with two of the country's other important religious sects--the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai--have petitioned the Supreme Court to nullify two government decrees authorizing the President's wife to purchase several hundred acres of public forest and farm land in Long Khanh Province. The petition charges that the purchase violates the constitution, which prohibits wives of government officials from entering into contracts with a public agency.

Last weekend the same four groups jointly sponsored a resolution in the Senate calling for Thieu's resignation. Sponsored by Senator Vu Van Mau and Father Tran Huu Thanh, the respective heads of the Buddhist and Catholic opposition, the resolution carries no legal impact and is unlikely to be presented to the lower house, which Thieu sympathizers firmly control. Nonetheless, it serves to redirect public attention to this issue and is the first time the two Buddhist and Catholic oppositions have jointly sponsored a call for the President to resign.

These latest moves are designed in part to recapture what momentum the political opposition had managed to generate prior to the step up of Communist military attacks in early December. The issues of corruption in government and press censorship were quickly dissipated by initial battlefield reports of large territorial gains by the Communists in the

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delta and popular concern that even heavier attacks were being planned against other targets. Most South Vietnamese appear convinced that the government's setbacks have been caused by the sharp reductions in US aid, and opposition attempts to blame losses on ineffective national leadership have not had much success.

The election by Buddhist leaders of a new membership for the church's policy-making body, the Vien Hoa Dao, could spell more trouble for the government. A majority of the clergymen elected to the policy-making body are sympathetic to the church's historically militant antigovernment priest, Thich Tri Quang. Consequently the church may now begin to adopt a tougher antigovernment position and provide more direct support to the National Reconciliation Force.

Armed with this firmer church policy, the Buddhists now appear more willing to make loose arrangements with the Catholics to further their combined goal of unseating President Thieu. The Catholics are amenable to such cooperation because they recognize the strength of the Buddhists and realize that any serious attempt to pressure Thieu into resigning or not seeking re-election could not be made without Buddhist support.



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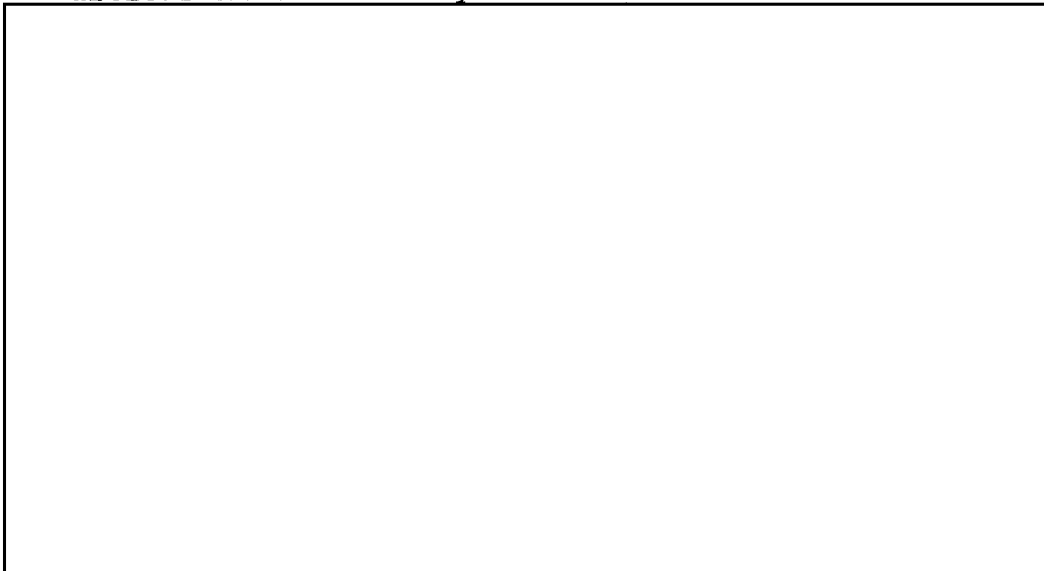
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The Catholics have been having less success organizing in the countryside, but they have established some local chapters around Saigon and in the central and highland provinces. The movement's principal problem continues to be one of support at the national level. While many of the country's bishops and archbishops are sympathetic to the group's overall program against corruption, they are not happy with the militant tactics of its leaders. The Catholic leaders could be more sympathetic to the group's actions if it became less militant and more responsible.

Neither the Cao Dai nor the Hoa Hao religious sect is likely to provide any significant support to an antigovernment coalition of Catholics and Buddhists. But they probably can be persuaded to align themselves with an effort to force a change in national leadership, especially if security conditions in the countryside continue to worsen.



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Tet: It's That Time of Year Again



Government commanders expect increased Communist offensive action to coincide with the Tet holidays, which this year are February 11-13. Already there have been several reports that Communist units have been celebrating early to take advantage of the presumed relaxation of government units during the actual holidays.

Government commanders, clearly worried about their ability to contain Tet attacks in selected areas, are not taking signs of Communist preparations lightly. Commanders in all four military regions are making preparations to contain what many of them feel will be significant main force action against their units.

One principal area of concern is around Tay Ninh city. Communist propaganda during the past few weeks has warned residents that heavy attacks will come during the Tet holidays. The Communists' recent capture of Ba Den Mountain overlooking the city and the government's inability to retake it have served to reinforce the Communists' threat. There are indications that units from the Communist 9th Division will shift from present positions in Binh Duong Province to spearhead the attack against Tay Ninh. Although these reports cannot be confirmed, the 9th Division is the only Communist unit in the region which has not seen combat recently. Its units are believed fresh, and government commanders in the area feel strongly that it will lead the attacks.

In conjunction with any major effort against Tay Ninh city, the Communists will reportedly step up shellings and terrorist activity in and

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around Saigon. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Viet Cong sapper units are preparing for these attacks by stocking supplies, identifying targets, and improving access routes into and out of the city. While the government has taken steps to contain such activity, it would be nearly impossible to prevent scattered attacks.

Another area of concern is the central highlands, especially the provincial capitals of Kontum, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, and Gia Nghia along the Cambodian border. Concern over indications that the North Vietnamese 968th Division has moved from southern Laos into the highlands to bolster Communist units already there has been heightened by reports that the 320th Division is moving south to attack targets in Darlac and Quang Duc provinces. Government commanders, frankly worried about their ability to protect all these areas against main-force Communist attacks, have conceded that they might be forced to give up control over some of them--particularly the provincial capitals of Kontum and Gia Nghia.

In the northern tier of provinces, the Communist threat appears less ominous. Most action, if it does occur, is expected in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces, where government forces are weakest. Communist units in these areas are also believed to be understrength and suffering from poor morale, however, and government commanders remain confident they can contain any main-force attack--provided the Communists do not reinforce.

[REDACTED] units from the Communist 5th Division are readying attacks against Moc Hoa, capital of Kien Tuong Province. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the 9th Division will also take part in the attacks, although such a deployment would

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seem unlikely before Tet. South Vietnamese forces so far have been able to box up the 5th Division, and during the past several days they claim to have inflicted heavy casualties on its units. If the casualties have indeed been severe, the 5th probably will not be used to attack a provincial capital which the government has indicated it will defend. The Communists are more apt to concentrate on expanding their base areas and infiltration routes and harassing traffic on major roads and canals.

Weather conditions will pose no constraints to either side in the coming weeks. Good fighting weather will continue until April or May from the highland provinces to the southern delta. The heavy monsoon rains in the northern coastal areas will begin tapering off soon and probably will have ended completely by early March.

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LAOS

National Assembly Issue
Still Hanging Fire

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The King's Council has delayed action on Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's latest proposal for dissolving the dormant, rightist-dominated National Assembly and transferring its legislative functions to the coalition government's Joint National Political Council. The council's stonewalling tactics almost certainly will not sit well with either Souvanna or the Lao Communists.

Souvanna's proposal, advanced in early December, called on the King to issue a royal decree formally abolishing the assembly--a move which would put the throne's stamp of approval on a decision taken by the coalition cabinet six months earlier. According to Souvanna's scenario, the political council would then be transformed into a legislature by expanding its membership from 42 delegates to 72, following a national referendum on the new appointees by provincial governors and district chiefs. The 30 additional delegates, like the original 42, would be divided equally between the two sides. Ten would be selected by the non-Communists, ten by the Pathet Lao, and ten other "qualified neutralists" by the unanimous agreement of both sides.

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The King's Council is obviously determined to complicate Pathet Lao efforts to gain control of the coalition's legislative machinery by circumventing the electoral process. The legalistic footdragging is designed to appeal to the King's strict constitutionalism, but it also reflects the council's desire for self-preservation. Since six of its twelve members are National Assembly deputies, the council's own fate could turn out to be linked closely to that of the assembly.

The Lao Communists have long sought to have the political council--which their leader Souphanouvong dominates--converted into a legislative replacement for the assembly, whose authority and legitimacy they have never recognized. In the interests of preserving the coalition's fragile stability, Prime Minister Souvanna has taken the lead in trying to push the idea along.

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